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Scholarship and Soccer: Interview with Alex Galarza

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Introduction

Interview

Kiuchi: First, can you tell us about your background and your work?

Galarza: I look at soccer clubs in the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires, and I look at them throughout the twentieth century but mostly right in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The reason I look at soccer clubs is it's a way to examine urban history through a civic association and a site of everyday life. While my research, of course, looks at the professional teams and the league itself, how it was structured, results, who were the important teams, I really take more of a sharper interest in how the larger clubs are able to bring tens of thousands of people together as members, and then more tens of hundreds or thousands of people as fans behind the social life of the club. So, the most concrete example of how I use soccer clubs to look at urban history is this failed stadium complex which was a mix between a stadium and a theme park. One of the most popular clubs, Boca Juniors, tried to become more socially relevant because while they were either the first or second most popular team in the country depending on who you asked, they didn't have as much social infrastructure. So they didn't have as many facilities and activities to offer their fans or their members whereas at River Plate, there's even a school in the stadium. So, you could do anything if you were a member of River Plate, so much so that if you lived around River, you would be a member of the club just to use their facilities and things even if you

weren't a fan. There was a president at Boca Juniors for twenty years whose name was Alberto Armando, and the current stadium is named after him. It's called the Alberto Armando Stadium. So anyway, this guy was the tenth richest man in Argentina. He wanted to expand the club's social infrastructure. So he saw building this stadium, sports complex, theme park, and general leisure space as a way of attracting new members to Boca and making Boca like a prominent place for activity in the city. The government donated not land, but actually water in the river, and then they filled in with seven artificial man-made islands and built most of what this complex was supposed to do. But they never built the stadium. So, the stadium was started in the early 1970s, but it became clear it was not going to get built by 1976, by the time of the military coup. So that was actually supposed to be where the 1978 World Cup was played, but since it was never built, it never happened. I look at this project. I look at cases like Boca and a couple other urban projects in these clubs to look at how both the government, the directors of the clubs, and the members of the clubs themselves viewed soccer clubs as a way to expand the urban infrastructure. It was going to be a very middle class leisure space, kind of imagination of what these activities would look like so that project had a drive-in movie theater, eighteen tennis courts, and a theme park for kids. These were activities that were kind of part and parcel of what Argentina in the 1950s and 60s was looking at as kind of desirable leisure, middle class consumptive spaces.

Kiuchi: That's interesting because when a lot of people want to know more about soccer or any sport, they tend to look at just soccer or they tend to look at just baseball, and then they are obsessed with stats. They are so obsessed with the history of the team, but not necessarily the history of that urban area. So what got you into that topic?

Galarza: Well, I first needed to look at a topic in Argentine soccer that allowed me to look at more than just soccer. What landed me in Argentina in the first place was that I looked at how clubs exist in a city and it's just that there are too many people who exist here in the city who aren't necessarily that interested in the professional team for this to be explained merely by professional soccer. There are too many women and children and men who aren't going to the stadium every day to say this club exists because of this professional team. My first time at Boca Juniors, I went into the library and was talking with older ladies in a knitting club. Anything you want to do, you can do through your club. The way I explain it to a lot of Americans is imagine your YMCA, your church group, your intermural teams, and your professional sports teams all wrapped up into one, and your civic association all wrapped up into one, and that's what the clubs are. I needed to look for a way to make Argentinian soccer relevant beyond just the sport itself. When I started looking at how vibrant the life of the clubs was, I said this is something I can look at as a way to understanding how people constitute their communities, and that came from realizing, less so today but still even very strong today, that a lot of the clubs have such strong neighborhood identities. Boca is a national team. The neighborhood itself has a very important mythical status in the club's identity, but has since moved far outside of the neighborhood, but still that neighborhood is rooted in the identity of its team, even though River Plate came out of the same neighborhood and there were other teams that came out of that neighborhood. A lot of neighborhoods, especially on the west side of Buenos Aires, somewhere like Velez Sarsfield, if you live in that area there is a high probability that you have either looked at becoming a member of that club or are a member of Velez Sarsfield just because there are so many things you wouldn't be able to do unless you were induced to get into the gym and use it or have your kid play on the soccer team. That's how I looked for a way to go beyond just the

history of the team and instead look at more of an institutional history of the club. When you look at the club itself, you start to find how involved it is in local politics, municipal politics, national politics, and the fabric of the city itself being woven largely by soccer clubs in many instances.

Kiuchi: I may be asking you to condense a book-length project into fifty words, but when you think about soccer or clubs, do you see them as a vehicle of community building or community engagement? Or is it where a community happens? How do you characterize it?

Galarza: The tension I like to talk about is between the clubs as nonprofit civic associations, which they have legal status as, and the reality of business logics. I look at how that tension was always in play though, from the times when the Argentinians were first forming youth teams to then become the larger teams. There was a question of amateurism, bringing in amateurs but you pay them. There was always a tension of "Are we just a club providing a field for its youth" or "Are we a club that's trying to win and grow and become the best it can be." In the earliest twentieth century you have to look at them as institutions for vehicles of community building. But I think the question that is a little more interesting for me, moving out of that original period of professional leagues and the more prominent clubs that stuck around is how this explains everyday life in the city. Once those communities are even established, how do they change over time, how are the people in those clubs using the clubs as way to lobby politicians for expanded fields or more opportunities for the club? There's always an aspect of community building going on there, but after a period we have to talk about not just the building of the community but the democratic life of the community itself, how that fits into the neighborhood, how that fits into the national or urban conception of what it is to live in a certain area and belong to a certain club and perform your everyday business in that club.

Kiuchi: For those of us who study soccer and society. it's quite obvious that there is a huge connection between soccer and society, and there are many of us studying it. Years ago you started Football Scholars Forum. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Galarza: You can correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe that four or five of us went to the Peanut Barrel [a local bar] after a seminar that Peter Alegi was teaching on global sports. The short story is I met Peter Alegi and I said this is a guy who is very well connected to other people who study soccer and it would be great just to mooch off of his contacts. I talked to him and asked if there was maybe a way we could get the people you know over Skype and talk about them about their work. And he said, "Yeah, I think that's a great idea" and so it started in a very limited focus around identifying a couple books that would be relevant to people here at Michigan State either moving through the seminar or who were interested in soccer. I asked if we could get a few people he was close with on Skype just to talk about their research. Since then, that's still the kernel of the group but since then it's evolved more into a platform for soccer scholarship in an academic community. Beyond the academics, we have journalists and enthusiasts who participate in the forums as well and professionals in the industry like Ray Hudson who is a commentator and former player in the NASL. What Peter and I and the members who have been most active in the group have been trying to do with the group is just to have it perform two functions: to be a venue for the presentation of research and a sounding board for those who are presenting their research to get feedback. Very simply, it's just who are the people who care about my work and can I get them to talk more about my work. It's been successful in that regard so far and we've been able to a few neat things like get a syllabus suppository together and I think that's been a very popular item because I've known a lot of professors who might not have the depth or the grasp of the literature of soccer but are content

experts in their fields and know about soccer in their particular context but don't necessarily know the wider literature about soccer. Looking at someone else's syllabus you can see they used it in a specific way around the unit around immigration, let's say. I can see myself doing that. I don't have to become a soccer expert I can just give a small lecture on that or assign a small reading on that. I think that's a nice tool to provide people with syllabus suppository because people can go in and see how others are teaching with this link between soccer and society either a whole course kind of way or just a few weeks or a unit kind of thing.

Kiuchi: How popular is soccer as a course topic?

Galarza: I'm very biased but I think it's enormously popular. I think it's a very popular subject because you see this generation being one that maybe not necessarily has pushed for but has been the recipient of greater media coverage around soccer and a more polished consumer package around professional soccer in this country. When I was growing up, you could not find soccer on television, aside from very prominent international matches or the World Cup or Champion's Leagues, but you would be looking in the newspaper for results, at least anyone who couldn't afford an incredible satellite connection. You see now where ESPN 2 and the main ESPN channel are covering the most prominent games from the Premier League and you have dedicated soccer channels that are part of the normal sports package on most cable providers. I think the access to professional leagues especially in Europe but also elsewhere is now at a point where the kinds of people that are attending four year institutions have a familiarity with soccer both as participants and with fans which I think was the crucial link. I grew up with many people that played soccer but then never took an interest in it as a professional league. That I think has alerted more people of my generation that even if they care nothing about the sport, or actually don't like the sport, that they get that it's a big deal in the rest of the world. That's a conversation

that I have frequently when I say I study soccer. I think putting soccer into courses or designing courses around soccer gets at an effort in universities to have a global studies focus. I think soccer is a perfect link for that because it allows you to get at culture, politics, and economics in a global sense with the carrot dangling in front of students like hey we're studying soccer, this is kind of fun. But, it's the perfect segway into what they might perceive as more serious topics such as economics, politics and the link between societies. I think my one experience with Peter Alegi as with an undergraduate course around soccer, a lot of them were enthusiasts, but not all of them, and the ones that were enthusiasts by the end realized that soccer is always more than just the game itself, it has all these built-in characteristics that make it part of the social, economic, political fabric of the community itself. I think it's a very popular course topic. I think the key for educators and people who are designing syllabi is to make that kind of a sell and say it's not just about soccer. It allows us to talk about other things and I'm going to be talking about other things, and to also make them realize that it's kind of a false dichotomy that we're setting up in the first place that we have to separate the political side of soccer from the sport itself. I think that's an easy sell once you have good examples out there of how to do it.

Kiuchi: When it comes to scholarship, I see a lot of journalists writing about soccer and society and right now I also see some scholars writing about that as well. What do you think about the proper stylistic balance?

Galarza: One of the most exciting things about, personally as a scholar, that I'm so happy to be involved in studying soccer, is I believe very strongly that academics need to be writing in a more journalistic mode. I think it would be unfair to say they've done a poor job but they haven't covered themselves in glory as a community of scholars with making their research relevant to a widely accessible public audience. There are always scholars who have been the exception. We

rightfully idolize many of these people like Howard Zinn who wrote books and took their scholarship and said I want to make it accessible to as many people as possible. I think soccer is a no brainer because most of us are in this because we like having those kinds of conversations with people; it's rare to find the soccer scholar, at least in my opinion, who just wants to be left alone in the archive. They want to talk to people about soccer. I think we're a group who is blessed with that opportunity. At least speaking from my own discipline, from history, the outgoing president of the AHA [American Historical Association] who had a great outgoing presidential talk at the last annual meeting, said that cutting edge research is one of the most important aspects of growth as a discipline, but nobody else will know about that unless we revert to the more familiar forms of telling stories. One of these more familiar forms is the rich tradition of journalistic soccer coverage that is for the thinker as well, not just the stats, not just the bar fights that the players get into, but the story behind the club itself. France is playing Germany in Paris today. Then you need to know about the historical, political, economic history between those two countries to realize there is also soccer rivalries there just because they're great teams, but you need to know about France and Germany as nations themselves, to understand why people get worked up about that match and why it's something that even if it's friendly I'm going to watch it or I want to watch it. I think what that outgoing president of the AHA said is very relevant and it's an opportunity for soccer scholars to look and say that we're blessed with a topic that it's very easy to make that jump from maybe the more erudite journal or monographed design research that we're doing to put that into a podcast, to put that into a story, say in *the Blizzard*. There's resurgence now of football fanzines I think with *the Blizzard* and *the Howler* and *Quarterly XI*, and just content that's out there that people write on their own. People say "oh, this is a really neat story." I think that journalistic production of soccer pundits and

journalists who are taking or who have always taken an interest in the historical and political aspects of soccer is something to be looked at as an incredible opportunity. I think that's what we try to do as football scholars as well is we try to identify not only monographs that have been published by University Presses but we watch films, we've read books written by journalists, and I think those two types of media as well are what people are actually consuming when they say "hey are you into soccer?" And you say "yeah" and then they start to list their favorite books and favorite films on soccer. And they'll say "Have you read the Miracle of Castel di Sangro?" "Yeah, yeah I've read this it's such an interesting story." Or "Have you watch *Pelada*?" "Oh yeah, they go and they play pick up around the world." Those are just neat stories, and those are perfect venues to us to say, it's very neat because it's a compelling story but look at everything about the human condition that we can also learn about by making that link between soccer and society.

Kiuchi: You were talking about the competition of journalistic scholarship and traditional scholarship. Do you think that's going to be the direction to go in the future?

Galarza: Yeah, I think so. I think it has to be. I think there's a number of factors that are pushing humanistic social scientists to make their scholarship more relevant to a wider audience, one on the funding side of public universities and budget cuts that have to be confronted with evidentiary based claims saying this is important stuff that cannot be eliminated from your universities. So I think that designing courses and producing scholarship that you can point to and say I didn't just write a monograph that was sold to a couple hundred libraries. There is an audience out there and it's important to the student body, it's important to a wider audience in our community beyond the student body. It's important globally because I have people visiting my website from all these different places. I think that's a good way to make that argument. I

think also there's an ethical imperative to make efforts even if not just journalistic modes of writing that's designed for wider audience but stuff that's more accessible in terms of not being behind a pay wall, not being in an academic journal that is owned by a large publishing company that you have to pay an enormous subscription to get to. I think if scholars start to push in that direction, we already see that people are very intrigued by it even on the largest most popular football podcasts, they have scholars that are looking at soccer on their podcasts. Or there are journalists who are academically trained, people like David Goldblatt who bring that background to their journalistic coverage of the sport as well. I think when academics are funded at public universities like this one, Michigan State, I think at least I have an ethical obligation to make my research available towards the local community that I'm studying in. So I want Argentines to care about what I'm writing. I also want the public taxpayer in Michigan who is paying for my Ph.D. funding to be able to access my work. They might not care as much about it as much as say an Argentinian soccer fan. But that it's out there, that it's accessible, and it's written with them in mind, I think, is an ethical imperative to take seriously as well. This is where I think a conversation about not just the journalistic mode of writing, not just the question of audience, and taking seriously the question of audience, but the question of looking at the forms of scholarly communication we have: publication, and the economics and politics we have with that situation, you scratch at one and then you start to realize it's implicated in the other. You say "Oh well, I don't write in the more journalistic way because I do need that monograph to get tenure." Or say, "I do that journalistic stuff whenever possible." If we had a system of promotion and tenure that was more receptive to the idea that the monograph wasn't the only coin of the realm, or at least that it could be supplemented and taken seriously with other sources, then there would be a department and a community of peers that would say it's great that you do that

podcast, and we see that as scholarship we don't see that as so and so is just having fun with their topic. No, it is fun, but it's also something that we take very seriously as a part of our role as scholars.

Kiuchi: I think when we study history we realize that at any moment in history, they thought that they were living the most special moment. I may be doing exactly that right now but when I think about, for example, Black Studies, the 1960s was the moment when it started. So in thirty or forty years from now, do you think we will look back and say, "Probably the 2010s, that was the moment soccer studies started"?

Galarza: I think there was a moment where the classics that were written in the 1970s and 1980s, and sports sociologists and people that were playing with real social theory and trying to look at the issues of sport and thinking about people like Bourdieu, people who looked at class in Britain and related it to working class activity like soccer. Those works will always be classics and they're important foundational works for people who then, people like Peter Alegi's generation who then said I want to do my dissertation about soccer and here's the social theory, here's the real proof that this is significant. I can relate this to social theory; this isn't something that I have to do alone. I can stand maybe on some key shoulders here. I think those two generations will always be assigned in comprehensive readings; they'll be a part of the literature and fantastic scholarship. But I think maybe you're right in that we're reaching a point of critical mass of the people that are looking at the subject itself, and I think the compression of time and space and technology with things like Skype and things like collaboration online are maybe allowing this community to reach a critical mass where it starts to think of itself as a subfield. People might have already considered it a subfield for a long time now, maybe for decades. What they consider a subfield and what their peers consider a subfield is a key question. I think we're

getting to a point now where there is going to be enough people in departments that have written an article or a book or incorporated it into a syllabus where people say "Oh, that's kind of its own thing, that's kind of its own subfield that's not even just sports." Those are the people looking at soccer as a unique position as a global sport. That does speak to so many different audiences. Maybe we are a little bit special but I don't think we're the most special, yet. I think there is going to be a point maybe in the next ten years that we'll look at not even something just like the Football Scholars Forum we'll be able to look at Football Scholars Forum as part of an ecosystem of scholars, soccer scholarship. I think at this point Football Scholarship Forum has tried its hardest at least in English and Spanish speaking worlds and a bit in Europe as well to kind of just at least catalog everyone that's out there studying soccer scholarship. But if we can all be more on each other's radars I think that will be where were getting closer to a point where we say this is kind of a generational block now, we can talk about kind of a cohort that's looking at more added volumes together, more specific conferences together, at web platforms like the football scholars forum where we can make this kind of accessible to our peers and our colleagues who don't study soccer.

Kiuchi: I'm going to ask you one last question. You talked about technology allowing us to have this forum, and you also work with technology quite a bit, in the Digital Humanities. For most people that are not aware of the Digital Humanities, Arts and Letter, Humanities, and other disciplines don't really mix well with technology. I think many traditional fans of soccer say, including probably FIFA, that soccer would not mix really well with technology. What's your take on that?

Galarza: I think technology is coming to the game. I think a system is from a fan's perspective. I think a system in which there is a tennis-like assessment of whether the ball has crossed the line

for example is something that would not alter the dynamics of the game radically. I think you could do it in ways like if it has passed the line, the ref has a little buzzer go off on his belt or something. He still has the ultimate decision of saying I know that physically the ball crossed the line but I can still see if there was a foul, all these other factors that go into that decision. I think technology is coming and I think there will be experimentation. There have been successful models saying we'll introduce it in a lower tier league and then promote it up. Technology in the academic sense, I think the Digital Humanities is a very interesting topic because that term itself is just a strategic term. I'm in the College of Social Science here. I'm a social scientist. I'm not a humanist at MSU. Here, in Matrix, we don't call it our Digital Humanities Center, but it is part of that ecosystem of Digital Humanities Centers. One of the assistant directors is an archeologist, again, Social Science. There are lots and lots of people that are working in the Digital Humanities that are not humanists. I recognize that the term has strategic value to it because it encapsulates some characteristics and values that are part of the DH community like open access, trying to bring others into the use of technology for their teaching, project oriented scholarship that doesn't necessarily put the monograph or the journal article as the only unit of scholarly production. These are characteristics of the DH community. It's really just a strategic term, I prefer the term digital scholarship because I think we'll get to a point where we're just using technology just like you're using a word processor to achieve your aims as a scholar. It's just a way to make the writing faster. There are parts of technology that change the nature of the scholarship we produce. The closer we can get to saying these are things that move us closer to producing. That there are people who are going to be providing enough examples that say, "Yes, this person is using all kinds of neat technology but really it's an argument about history and anthropology." It could be in a monograph as well and it could be taken just as seriously. I think

with soccer and technology in the academic sense, soccer in the Digital Humanities has an opportunity to overlap with that goal of open access, overlap with that question of taking wide audiences as the point of reference for our writing from our inception, rather than as an afterthought for after we get our real scholarly production off. How can we build an exhibit on a webpage that is designed to invite the readers not just to read the text but engage with the sources itself, maybe download the sources and produce their own scholarship. In Argentina, I know lots of people who are using blogs and just taking pictures of their sources as amateur historians and writing stories about those sources and saying there are no academics producing those histories. The amateur historians use the web as a way to collect more data, as a way to collect stories from others, to connect with others who might know more about collecting the memorabilia of the club for example. I think soccer scholarship and digital scholarship has some opportunities to work together on these kinds of things. Part of what I'm trying to do is in the community of Digital Humanities say look there are subjects like soccer that are inherently interesting to a wide audience, and that audience is on the web. How can we publish on the web for a way that's accessible to them? How can we bring that scholarly rigor and that long-form argument to a place where it's consumable at more of like a fanzine format?

Kiuchi: People say that those who can't do teach. When it comes to soccer scholars, are they good soccer players?

Galarza: I would rate myself as a very average player. But I would rate some of my colleagues as very talented soccer players. We were just talking about Andrew Guest before this interview. He was the original captain of one of the professional teams here in the U.S., the Michigan Bucks. I played with him a few times and he's quite impressive. Peter Alegi played college ball here, and is still in his forties, an excellent player. My advisor as well played at Georgetown. The

Argentinians I play with are pretty good too. Now an economist, one guy who is in his late fifties, I'd say who I play pickup with on a weekly basis, he is a phenomenal. You can tell in his younger days, he could've gone down a different path and had things work differently for him. There are plenty of good players out there. There are also some average players I've played with, but I think that's part of the diversity of soccer itself. How many of the most rabid fans in the world can we give a ball to and they won't be able to do much with it? That's kind of part of soccer anyway. There are a lot of people who are enamored with the sport and would die for their team, but aren't particularly gifted. I think Eduardo Galeano, big writer in soccer, talked about how he was the last picked on all of his teams. This was part of the allure for soccer for him that he could never be good at it, so he felt that his love would be best captured in kind of writing about the game instead of being a good player.

Kiuchi: Thank you for your time today.

Galarza: Thank you.